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Stop That Leak!

Nothing intrigues the performers in this political circus more than a purloined letter from a Cabinet officer to the President, especially if there's a whiff of treachery in the wind.

The hunt is on here for the villain who assisted in the publication of Secretary of Defense Weinberger's don't-give-away-the-store warning to Mr. Reagan just before the summit meeting in Geneva. But don't hold your breath until the culprit is found.

Consider instead the antics of the plumbers who are looking for the leakers. The Defense Investigation Service of the Pentagon has ordered "a thorough, professional investigation" to ferret out any suspicious character on the premises who might have slipped the letter to The New York Times and The Washington Post.

As proof of his integrity, Assistant Secretary of Defense Richard N. Perle, whose enthusiasm for an arms control agreement with the Russians is not excessive, has come forward with an offer to take a lie-detector test to prove his innocence. This will give you an idea of what has happened here to the old notion that a man's word is his bond.

You can bet dollars to rubles, which is fairly long odds, that the villain will not be found in the Pentagon by the in-house cops. So the search will have to reach out to the White House, the State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, which were also favored with official copies of Mr. Weinberger's letter.

Here two definitions are relevant. It

is generally agreed in the Washington newspaper corps that an exclusive story is a "scoop" when you get it, and a "leak" when the opposition gets it. There also used to be a theory here that a government was the only vessel that leaked from the top. But that theory of leakage no longer holds.

It was destroyed by the photocopying machine. This infernal invention, now humming and winking in every closet in every department of government, did more to threaten the security of the Republic than all the Communist guerrillas in Central America.

Just let a few copies of Cappy's final advice to the President cross the Potomac in sealed pouches, and before you can say Caspar Willard Weinberger dozens of anonymous bureaucrats will be producing hundreds of copies, dreaming about writing books in retirement and babbling secrets to their sweethearts in the night.

So the mole who came out of the hole is not likely to be found. One can imagine with what zeal Attorney General Meese will investigate his old California buddies at the State and Defense Departments and what help he'll get from Bill Casey at the C.I.A.

There is, however, maybe something more important and interesting than this plumber's game: Not who leaked the letter, but why the Secretary of Defense sent it to the President just before the summit talks.

We have it on the word of the Secretary of State that there was nothing new in the letter, that Mr. Weinberger had said the same thing to the President a dozen times.

Is it conceivable, then, that after months of preparation for the first meeting between the leaders of the two nuclear giants in six years, that the President had still not made up his mind on the SALT II and antiballistic missile questions?

Or could it be that Mr. Weinberger couldn't be sure what the President would say or do in the distracting tumult of Geneva and just couldn't resist reinforcing his warnings before the President took off?

This is, and for a long time has been, the critical question about the conduct or casual misconduct of Mr. Reagan's foreign policy. Especially his best friends wonder what he will say or do strolling along the lake or walking through the woods with Mikhail Gorbachev.

Mr. Weinberger, on the other hand, doubts everybody's judgment but his own. He is a true believer, a patriot of his country, a brilliant advocate who thinks he knows, by God, how to defend the nation from the moral monsters of the Soviet Union.

But at least seen from this corner, he's not a deceitful man who would try to sabotage the Geneva talks with sly leaks to the press. It's just that with relentless conviction, bordering on intellectual arrogance, he has made enemies, some of whom by accident or design may have leaked his letter to embarrass him, which here is called the Al Haig treatment.

Anyway, this is the sort of personal and policy intrigue that fascinates Washington and drives George Shultz up the State Department wall. But behind the letter lies the deeper question of how policy is made, or not made, and this worries even the President's friends and allies more than the care to say in public. □